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FOR NEA/ARP

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SUBJECT: AJ Director's Take on 6/3 Bin Laden Tapes

(SBU) KEY POINTS

-- (SBU) On the sidelines of Ambassador's meeting with senior Al Jazeera (AJ) editors to discuss President Obama's Cairo speech, Ambassador pressed AJ Director General Wadah Khanfar on why AJ aired messages from Osama Bin Laden and Ayman Zawahiri on June 3 during the run-up to the President's speech.

-- (SBU) Khanfar said that AJ had received the Bin Laden tape as an exclusive, which explains why no other station ran it. It was 35 minutes long, but AJ ran only seven minutes. Asked why Bin Laden chose AJ, Khanfar said, "I can't blame him; we have five times the audience of our closest competitor, Al Arabiya."

-- (SBU) Khanfar claimed that the timing of the tape's airing, which coincided with POTUS's arrival in Riyadh, may have been purposely calculated by Bin Laden. He asserted that the President's schedule was not connected to AJ's decision on when to air the tape.

END KEY POINTS

11. (SBU) On June 8, Ambassador visited AJ headquarters to discuss with senior editors President Obama's June 4 speech in Cairo. Before that meeting, Ambassador and PAO took the opportunity to meet privately with AJ Director General Wadah Khanfar and press him on AJ's airing of recorded messages from Osama Bin Laden and Ayman Zawahiri on June 3 during the run-up to the President's speech. Ambassador asked why Bin Laden's comments had been given such prominence, especially when the President's speech was clearly going to be one aimed at reconciliation with the Muslim world.

12. (SBU) Khanfar said that AJ had received the Bin Laden tape as an exclusive, which explained why no other station carried it. The entire recording was 35 minutes long, he claimed, but AJ aired only a total of seven minutes in several segments during its news bulletins. Asked why Bin Laden chose AJ, Khanfar replied, "I can't blame him; we have five times the audience of our closest competitor, Al Arabiya."

13. (SBU) Khanfar argued that Bin Laden's prominence on AJ was actually reduced by the President's speech. Normally, he asserted, a news story on AJ runs for a 24-hour cycle, but the Bin Laden recording ran only from 1500L to 2100L, and was pushed away by much more coverage of the POTUS speech.

14. (SBU) Ambassador noted that the timing of the Bin Laden broadcasts certainly appeared to have been aimed to coincide with the President's arrival in Saudi Arabia and the arrival statement he delivered there. Khanfar averred that this may have been Bin Laden's goal, but asserted that AJ's decision to air it had nothing to do with the President's schedule.

15. (SBU) He claimed that AJ had received the tape at 1100L, reviewed it at an editorial board meeting, and approved it for airing at 1300, then had it prepared and ready for broadcast during the 1450 news bulletin. This coincided with Obama's 1440 arrival in Riyadh,

but was not done intentionally. Khanfar added that Al Arabiya included a mention of Bin Laden's recording in its news scroll while the President was speaking in Riyadh.

LEBARON